Parents' Views of Composite Classes in an Australian Primary School

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Abstract

Parents of children in a large primary school in New South Wales were asked questions related to their attitudes towards and beliefs about composite (multigrade) classes. Parental concerns about composite classes are commonly reported as negative and this study confirmed this concern. Issues identified as causing concern for parents were a belief that some grades and some children are more suited than others to being part of a composite class, position in the class (younger or older grade), cohesion both within the class (class identity) and with grade peers in monograde classes (grade identity), perceived choice (between composite and monograde classes) and selection bias. Selection of particular teachers and students for the composite classes had both positive and negative effects – a positive effect on the composite class but a negative effect on the monograde classes because of the removal of the good role models and the 'best' teachers. Many parents reported more favourable attitudes after a positive experience with a composite class but not all such parents were prepared to indicate their support for composite classes.

Introduction and Context of Study

In Australian primary schools, classes at all levels of schooling are predominantly monograde (single-grade or 'straight'), with all students being approximately the same age, but mixed-age classes, where the mix can be anything from two grades to seven, also exist. The different types of mixed-age class in Australia are described below prior to a description of the particular study carried out.

Three main types of mixed-age class/school in Australia

There are many different types of mixed-age classes in primary schools in Australia. Terminology differs both within and between States and can be difficult to clarify. The following 'descriptive definitions' of the three main types are fairly well accepted in the literature relating to mixed-age classes.

'Composite' classes most often consist of one class containing two grades or years of schooling. They are commonly found when a neat division of students into even-sized classes does not occur. 'Left-over' children from different grades are combined into one class for reasons of administrative and financial expedience. They typically change their form so that one year the composite classes might be for grades 1/2 and 4/5 and the following year they might be for grades K/1, 3/4 and 5/6 (or any other possible combination). Hence there is no continuity of teacher experience and no philosophical commitment to the structure. Such classes commonly co-exist with monograde classes. Support for composite class teachers varies enormously and may be non-existent if a teacher is the only such teacher, or one of a small number of teachers, in the school. Composite class teachers can thus feel isolated within a school (Gayfer 1991, p.13).

'Multigrade' commonly refers to classes containing more than one grade and often more than two grades. Composite classes are therefore a type of multigrade class. Generally, however, 'multigrade' refers to small rural schools and classes with more than two grades, rather than to composite classes in larger schools. 'Multigrade' usually implies a permanence that is not a feature of composite classes. In other countries, for example, and especially developing countries or countries where universal education has not yet been attained, the term 'multigrade' is used to include both small, usually rural, classes (such as K–2 and 3–6) as well as two-grade composites but the two-grade composites are likely to be a permanent organisational structure. A multigrade teacher's philosophical stance is not as easy to describe – such teachers may or may not believe that the mixed-age nature of the class is desirable and preferable to a monograde class. As Mason and Good (1996, p.256) have indicated, making global judgements about any type of class is futile, since teachers vary their strategies and approaches and an observation on any designated day could be atypical of that teacher's normal practice. Similarly to composite class teachers, collegial support for multigrade teachers can be virtually non-existent because there may be no other teacher, or just one other teacher, in the school.

'Multiage' usually describes classes containing several grades (commonly two or three) which are formed by choice and on the basis of a philosophical commitment to the type of learning which occurs when children of different stages of development learn together. In many schools, teachers combine classes and teach the twice-as-big class as a team. Teacher continuity and experience are common, and such classes are often part of a whole-school structure, i.e. all classes are multiage. Support for teachers is thus also usually strong. Confusingly, multiage is also used as an umbrella term to cover all types of mixed-age class (e.g., see Curriculum Directorate 1997).

In the study reported here, the classes were composite classes in most of the senses described above. Where appropriate, other studies and literature reports have been

cited but it should be noted that 'comprehensive research on combination [composite] classes is almost nonexistent' (Mason & Doepner 1998, p.160).

Primary school studied

The school was a large, co-educational primary school in New South Wales, with more than 650 students K–6. Classes in the school were usually monograde but every year there were up to three composite classes. The composite classes changed from year to year depending on the enrolment in each grade.

There were twenty-eight teachers in the school, twenty-three of whom taught their own class. The other five teachers were support teachers of some kind (e.g., to help children with learning difficulties). Twenty-two of the twenty-eight teachers had more than ten years' teaching experience, and more than half the staff had taught at the school for more than five years. Teacher stability was a feature of the school but teachers changed their class of children every year. Experience of teaching a composite class varied but almost half the teachers (twelve) had less than three years' experience of teaching a composite class.

In the year of the study, eight of the twenty-three classes (35%) were composite classes. There was no administrative necessity to have so many composites but the teachers decided, for reasons of increased stability and increased collegial support, to split some monograde classes into two composite classes (e.g., a monograde Year 5 and a monograde Year 6 into two Year 5/6 classes). Reorganising some monograde classes into composite classes allowed for increased stability because the usual disruption of reorganising classes several weeks into first term, as regularly happened to cater for population mobility in the town, was avoided. The flexibility of slotting new students into existing classes is facilitated by multigrade grouping (Forlin and Birch 1995, p.91) and this was clearly demonstrated by an analysis of past annual enrolment patterns in the school. Collegial support was also increased, as each composite class teacher had at least one other composite class teacher teaching the same grade. Classes from Kindergarten to Year 2 were left as monograde classes except for one K/1 class; classes in Years 3–6 consisted of a mix of monograde and composite classes, with each grade having a mixture of both types of class. All composite classes except one covered two grades; the exception covered three grades (3/4/5) and was formed by necessity rather than outright choice (though the teacher was willing to teach such a class).

Although there was no administrative necessity for so many composite classes, in other respects the classes fitted the description above – lack of teacher experience, lack of continuity of such classes in the school, no *philosophical* commitment to the structure on educational grounds, co-existence of monograde classes, and different grades within one classroom taught separately for much of the time.

Methodology and Analysis

In reaction to complaints from parents about the disruptive beginning to the school year, in the year prior to the study the Principal discussed the problem with the School Council. Analysis of past years' enrolment patterns followed, and the data were presented at a Staff Meeting. The decision to restructure the classes the following year, in an attempt to avoid the problem, was made by the whole staff.

Since the impetus for the change came from parents' complaints, it was felt to be essential to survey parents to gauge their reaction to the change. The opportunity was then taken to ascertain their views about many issues related to composite classes in general.

Parents were asked to respond to a survey containing forty-five items, some of which were multi-part items. The survey was tested on a small number of parents before being distributed to the whole parent body. Some items required a written answer, some required a yes/no answer (tick a box but with opportunity to comment if desired), and some items were Likert-scale items. Parents filled in a different survey for each child. A total of 190 families responded, with information relating to 284 children. Although 35% of classes in the school were composite, 41% of the data obtained related to children in a composite class.

The majority of parents who completed the survey were mothers (82%) with 12.5% completed by fathers and 5.5% by both parents. Some surveys were completed by parents from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds but specific data were not collected. In general, mothers are more likely to be involved in their child's schooling – being a parent helper, collecting the child from school, attending Parents and Citizens (P&C) meetings and parent–teacher interviews. The gender disparity in terms of who completed the survey was not felt to be a factor likely to distort the results but the term 'parents' needs perhaps to be conceptualised as 'mostly mothers'.

A weakness in the methodology was that only one survey was administered, and in it parents were asked to recall their initial attitudes at the beginning of the school year. However, the change in class structure was widely discussed, both in chance encounters between parents and more formally at P&C and School Council meetings, all of which were experienced by the author. It was common knowledge that a survey would be administered; the original plan was for two surveys but this proved impossible to achieve. It should be noted that no parent claimed any difficulty in recalling their initial views – there were no comments such as 'can't remember!'.

An additional weakness in the methodology is that the findings were based simply on a survey. No follow-up interviews were carried out, for example (though this had

been the original intention). The author had many conversations with parents during the year, and was a regular visitor in classrooms, but no formal data were collected from these activities. The survey, however, included both quantitative and qualitative responses, often in the same item.

This article reports primarily the quantitative findings, with qualitative comments included as they relate to the quantitative data and add depth to the quantitative results. Comments written on the survey were very helpful to elucidate reasons for particular responses and allow the issues to be conceptualised. The quantitative data were analysed (using *Statview,* a software program) by means of observed frequencies, contingency tables, expected values, and row and column totals expressed as percentages of the respondents. Chi-square (χ^2) values were computed on the raw scores and are reported in the text but, as an attempt to be more accessible to many readers, the results are presented as percentages of responses (with observed frequencies also reported in the tables). For ease of reading, '%' instead of 'per cent' has been used and results have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Results

Data from the survey will be discussed in three main sections:

- *initial attitudes* – what were parents' initial attitudes toward composite classes (at the beginning of the year of study)?
- parents' *beliefs and attitudes* about a range of issues related to composite classes
- *end-of-year attitudes* – were there changes in attitudes resulting from experience with a composite class? What were parents' end-of-year attitudes?

Initial attitudes

Anecdotal findings and research evidence that parents do not like composite classes (Acheson 1984, cited in Brown & Martin 1989, Craig & McLellan 1987, Gayfer 1991, Lloyd 1997, Mason & Doepner 1998, Mulcahy 1993, Roseth 1981, Vincent 1999, Watson, Phillips and Wille 1995) were confirmed by this study. When asked about their reaction at the beginning of the year when they found out which class their child would be in, 86% of respondents with a child in a composite class reported a negative reaction compared with 14% with a child in a monograde class.

Parents were asked the cause of their reaction – was it because of the teacher or the type of class? Most parents were prepared to choose but some answered 'both'. Negative reactions were clearly based on the type of class (78%) and positive

reactions were nearly three times more likely to be based on the teacher than the type of class (62% compared with 22%; see Table 1). A third category, 'both', was included in the survey item for those parents who found it impossible to distinguish the main reason for their reaction. The relationship between the parents' reaction and the reason given for their reaction (teacher or type of class) was significant ($\chi^2 = 55.7$, $p = .0001$).

Table 1: Parents' reactions to child's class compared with reasons for their reaction (percentages and observed frequencies n)

	Positive reaction		Mixed; unsure		Negative reaction		Totals
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	*n*
Type of class	22	32	51	18	78	39	89
Teacher	62	91	40	14	10	5	110
Both	16	24	9	3	12	6	33
Totals:	100	147	100	35	100	50	232

This negative reaction of parents to the idea of their child being in a composite class is further emphasised by looking at a comparison of parents' reaction to their child's class placement with the type of class (monograde or composite), as shown in Table 2. The relationship between these two items was again significant ($\chi^2 = 51.3$, $p = .0001$). Parents were more than six times more likely to have a negative reaction if their child was in a composite class (86% compared with 14%).

Table 2: Parents' reaction to child's class compared with type of class (percentages and observed frequencies n)

	Positive reaction		Mixed; unsure		Negative reaction		Totals
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	*n*
Composite	29	47	52	23	86	43	113
Monograde	71	114	48	21	14	7	142
Totals:	100	161	100	44	100	50	255

Interestingly, parent reaction was not related to their own experience in a composite class. All parents who had a negative reaction to their child's class placement and who had experienced a composite class in their own schooling rated their own experience as Very satisfactory (25%) or Satisfactory (75%). Factors besides 'own experience' are

obviously very influential in determining a parent's reaction to their child being placed in a composite class. It is interesting (and perhaps noteworthy) that 61% of parents with composite class experience had this experience in a small one- or two-teacher school, that is, in a multigrade class, whereas their child was placed in a composite class when there were alternative monograde classes in the school.

Twice as many parents with a child in a monograde class as in a composite class agreed that they understood how the class operated and were happy about how the class operated. The percentages for both items were 67% agreeing (monograde) and 33% disagreeing (composite). Fairly similar proportions of parents claimed not to understand how their child's class operated (58% for composite and 42% for monograde) but two-and-a-half times as many parents of a child in a composite class as parents of a child in a monograde class were not happy about how their child's class operated (71% compared with 29%). [$\chi^2 = 13.051$, $p = .011$]

When asked if they would consider changing schools because of the number of composite classes, most parents said they would not (71%, whereas 23% said they would).

In sum, the number of parents who had a negative reaction to their child's placement in a composite class was greater than expected, and a large majority was not happy about how their child's composite class operated even though many admitted to not understanding how it operated.

Beliefs and attitudes

Overview data for a number of items from the survey are presented in Table 3. For overview purposes, 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' responses have been combined, as have 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree'. Observed frequencies (n) are also included.

A large majority of parents (81%) believed that some children are more suited than others to being in a composite class. Although no parent admitted to being unsure of his or her belief in relation to this question of 'child suitability', 7% did not answer it.

An equally large majority of parents (81%) believed that the most important factor in a child's schooling is the teacher but this time 7% of the parents admitted their uncertainty.

A series of questions teased out parents' attitudes about position in the class, i.e. as a member of the younger grade or of the older grade. While 62% of parents were happy for their child to be in a class with older-grade children, a slightly reduced proportion (57%) believed their child would benefit academically from this

arrangement. The percentage agreeing was further reduced (48%) in response to the claim that being in the younger part of the class would improve their child's social skills.

Table 3: Parents' beliefs and attitudes as indicated by their responses to survey items

Survey item (item number in square brackets)	Agree		Unsure		Disagree	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Some children are more suited than others to being in a composite class (17)	81	150			12	22
The most important factor in my child's schooling is who the teacher is (23)	81	229	7	21	12	33
I am happy for my child to be in a class with younger-grade children (26)	29	82	27	76	44	125
Having younger-grade children in the class means my child could get extra help by working with these children (27)	26	74	34	95	40	113
Having younger-grade children in the class would improve my child's social skills (28)	30	86	26	73	44	123
Outside school, my child is comfortable playing with younger children (38)	90	254	4	11	6	17
I am happy for my child to be in a class with older-grade children (29)	62	176	17	49	21	59
My child would benefit academically by being in a class with older-grade children (30)	57	162	26	73	17	49
Having older-grade children in the class would improve my child's social skills (31)	48	137	28	80	24	67
Outside school, my child is comfortable playing with older children (39)	91	260	4	11	5	13
In a composite class, the teacher probably spends more time with the younger-grade children (32)	25	69	49	139	26	73
In a composite class, the teacher probably spends more time with one grade than the other (33)	17	46	44	124	39	110
In a composite class, children learn to work more independently (34)	69	194	21	59	10	29
I understand how my child's class operates (41)	64	180	19	54	17	48
I am happy about how my child's class operates (42)	66	185	26	72	8	24

Only 29% of parents were happy for their child to be in a class with younger-grade children. Less than one-third saw any academic (26%) or social (30%) benefit from being in a class with younger children.

Parents' lack of certainty about how a composite class operates is evident from the result that almost half the parents (49%) were unsure whether the teacher would spend more time with the younger-grade children, and virtually equal numbers agreed (25%) and disagreed (26%) that this would be the case. They were less uncertain about whether a composite class teacher would spend more time with one grade than the other (44%) but more of them were prepared to give a definite opinion, with 39% disagreeing and only 17% agreeing.

Although a similar total proportion of parents claimed to understand (64%) and be happy (66%) about how their child's class operated, a comparison of parents with a child in a composite class and parents with a child in a monograde class showed, as discussed above, that monograde parents were twice as likely to understand and be happy about the class's operation.

Parents' written comments revealed other beliefs and attitudes, as summarised below:

- *'Stigma' issue when composite classes co-exist with monograde classes.*
  Parents' negative reaction to composite classes, in other words, is not necessarily to the composite class *per se* but to the fact that composite classes are seen as the 'poor relation', only formed when absolutely necessary and got rid of as soon as possible.
- *Social cohesion (grade identity vs class identity).*
  This issue is related to the issue above. Parents were concerned that when their children were placed in a composite class for only one year, they lost their grade identity for that year but did not gain a compensating class identity.
- *Some grades need to be monograde (for example, Kindergarten, Year 6).*
  Just as parents believed some children were more suited to a composite class than others, a comment made by many parents was that some grades are less suitable to be part of a composite class than others. The first year of school (Kindergarten) and the last year before high school (Year 6) were both mentioned in this category.

Both academic and social concerns were considered fundamental to most parents' beliefs and attitudes. An item was included in the survey to try to work out which of these concerns was considered more important. Perhaps not surprisingly, parents found it difficult to make a clear choice. The great majority of responses were either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to the two items 'My primary concern is for my child to be happy at school' (93%) and 'My primary concern is for my child to achieve

academically at school' (90%). The breakdown of the two 'agree' responses for each item showed a difference, however, with 55% of parents strongly agreeing that their primary concern was for their child to be happy at school and 36% strongly agreeing that their primary concern was for their child to achieve academically at school. In other words, the breakdown between 'strongly agree' and 'agree' was reversed in each case, even though the total proportion agreeing was virtually the same.

Changes in beliefs and attitudes during the year

Compared with their reaction at the beginning of the year, nearly one-third of parents changed their opinion about their child's class (30.5% changed compared with 69.5% unchanged). When parents who changed their mind were compared with the type of class their child was in, the following results were obtained – 34% of parents with a child in a composite class did change their mind compared with 24% of parents with a child in a monograde class. Thus a larger proportion of parents with a child in a composite class changed their mind.

An obvious next question relates to the direction of opinion change – was the change towards feeling more positive or more negative? Parents' written comments were coded to give an indication of the direction of opinion change. A change from negative or unsure to positive, from positive to even more positive, or from negative to less negative, was coded as a positive change; a change from positive or unsure to negative, from positive to less positive, or from negative to even more negative, was coded as a negative change. Data were obtained from 67 parents only. Of those parents who did respond in the current study, however, a clear majority (43, or 64%) had more positive feelings at the end of the year than at the beginning.

The next comparison made was between direction of opinion change (more positive or more negative) and type of class. For children in a composite class, more than twice as many parents had a positive attitude change than a negative one (65% positive, 30% negative), whereas for children in a monograde class, slightly less than half had a positive change and slightly more than half had a negative change (46% positive, 54% negative). Looked at in a different way, of the total number who had a positive attitude change, 67% had a child in a composite class and 33% had a child in a monograde class. The number of parents with a child in a composite class who experienced a positive attitude change (and the number of parents with a child in a monograde class who experienced a negative attitude change) was greater than the expected value but not significantly so (p = .2054).

No conclusions can be drawn from the numerical data about the *reasons* why parents changed their minds. However, 88 parents wrote comments explaining the reasons for their opinion change. For parents with a child in a composite class the three most

common reasons given for their change to a more positive opinion were that their child progressed well/had a positive experience, that the teacher was good, and that the child benefited from the age mix in the class.

For parents with a child in a composite class the most common reasons for their change to a more negative opinion were social/friendship concerns, children joining other classes for some subjects (a strategy used by some of the teachers), and the belief that their Year 6 child needed a monograde class.

For parents with a child in a monograde class, the most common reason given for their change to a more positive opinion related to being pleased with the teacher. Reasons for a change to a more negative opinion also related most commonly to the teacher, but also to behaviour problems in the class perceived to be caused by better-behaved peers being selected for the composite classes, i.e. the issue of selection bias.

Most parents (73%) ended up feeling comfortable about their child's class placement, and the two most common reasons for this feeling related to the child's achievement and the teacher. By contrast, the two most common reasons for not feeling comfortable about their child's class placement related to social concerns and achievement. It is interesting that a small number of parents (7%) actually decided their child would have been better off in a composite class.

The lingering effect of beginning-of-year bias against composite classes, even in the face of a positive experience during the year, is shown in comments such as the following:

> Still guarded but child appears to be achieving.
>
> No, I don't really like composite classes, although I think it is more beneficial for the lower class rather than the higher one and my child has coped.
>
> No, teacher has been good but I am not at all happy to have my child in a composite class, separated from others in her grade. It is much harder on both students and teachers.
>
> I don't like composite classes in Year 6, even though there didn't seem to be any problems.

The following comments show that, for at least some parents, their initial prejudice about composite classes was challenged by their child's positive experiences:

> I feel mixing with the older children has been beneficial.

> Yes! I was very unhappy about my child being in the older part of the composite. But any fears I had of older children not being encouraged to extend themselves have completely disappeared.
>
> Yes, I can see now that there are many positive aspects to composite classes.
>
> My initial reaction ['learned' reservation] came from hearing parents speak extremely negatively about composite classes – 'I won't have my child in one of those classes!' However, upon speaking to my child and his teacher, I decided it could only be a good experience. Change and adaptation are very much a part of life.
>
> Yes, the child has an excellent teacher and has not been disadvantaged due to the composite class.
>
> I feel more positive about composite classes over the year because my child is interested in them and because it appears that good teachers are placed on these classes.
>
> Yes, we now know that with the right teacher this type of class can work.
>
> Yes, we have found a composite class quite good for Child 1 except for making friends. Both children found great difficulties being separated from previous classmates.

Discussion

Parents in this study believed that some children are more suited than others to being in a composite class. It is highly likely that this finding reflects the belief that in a composite class, children of one grade are left to work on their own while the teacher works with the other grade. In fact, 69% of parents agreed that children in a composite class learn to work more independently. Their view is supported in the literature (e.g., Vincent 1999, p.x, p.3). Perras (1983, cited in Gayfer, p.11) also concurs: 'much of the research shows that students develop such traits as independence, dependability and self-reliance'.

Children with pre-existing independent work habits and good behaviour are often selected for the composite classes and schools following this practice may well be influential in shaping parents' beliefs about some children being more suitable members of such a class.

Parents are concerned about their child's academic progress but also about social issues such as their child's friendship group. Primary-school children seem to choose the majority of their friends from amongst their classmates. In many composite classes, the grade-split is not even and some students find themselves in a class with only a small number of their grade peers, sometimes as few as three or four. Depending on how the children for the class are selected, it is not uncommon for individual students to feel isolated in terms of friendship groups within their class. Separation from friends was commonly reported by parents (via written comments on the surveys) as a concern.

Sometimes the few children per grade who are not in monograde classes get overlooked when the rest of their grade participates in special events such as an excursion or 'club' activity. In situations such as this, the child in the composite class loses grade identity but does not necessarily gain a class identity, especially if the teacher organises the class along grade lines. For these children, being in a composite class is a form of 'double jeopardy'. Watson, Phillips and Wille (1995) reported in their study of composite class teachers that the issue of grade versus class identity was highly contentious. Separation from grade peers will remain an issue when composite classes are temporary and only formed as a 'last resort'.

This statement implies a further issue – that of perceived choice. The issue of perceived choice is probably a relevant factor in determining a parent's reaction to their child's class placement. Roseth (1981, p.2), for example, claims that composite classes create more controversy in metropolitan areas because they are the exception rather than the rule. When all classes in a school are multigrade, such as in small rural schools, social issues and grade identity do not seem to influence attitudes; indeed, parent attitudes to multigrade classes in schools where such classes are permanent have been reported as positive (e.g. Dunn 2000, Reed & Westberg 2003). Forlin and Birch (1995, p.98) claim that 'students and parents prefer the learning environment of the single teacher or multigrade school'. Social issues are perhaps countered to some extent by the community support for rural schools which has been reported in many studies (e.g., ASCD 2005, Gomolchuk & Piland 1995, New South Wales Department of School Education 1989, Pratt & Treacy 1986). In this study, many parents who had a satisfactory small-school experience in their own schooling were nevertheless concerned when their child was placed in a composite class. When the composite classes are in a minority or co-exist with monograde classes, then the issue of grade identity, linked with the issue of perceived choice, seems to develop. Forlin and Birch (1995, p.100) describe the process of multigrade teaching operating within a framework of single-grade teaching as akin to 'pouring new wine into old bottles'.

In terms of achievement issues, the belief (and experience) that the 'better' teachers are placed on composite classes ameliorated many parents' unhappiness about the class structure. In this study, as has been reported by other researchers (Brown & Martin 1989, Lloyd 1999, Mason & Burns 1996, Mason & Doepner 1998, Veenman 1995, pp.327–328, 371), children as well as teachers were specially selected for the composite classes – selected on the basis of their independent work habits and good behaviour. This 'selection bias' meant that the composite classes were seen by some parents in a positive light – their child had good teaching and good role models in such a class. Roseth (1981, p.16) also reported parents being 'flattered' when their children were selected for a composite class on the basis of their above-average ability and that knowledge of this selection bias 'appeased' their earlier objections.

The companion finding that some monograde classes in the current study were negatively affected by selection bias – because the 'good' teachers and 'good' students were in the composite classes – was commented on by parents. Hohl (1991, pp.23–27) discusses the issue of selection bias in her report about multigrade classes in Quebec: 'Very often it is the high achievers and those without behavioural problems who are selected for multi-program [i.e. composite] classes. The result is that the other classes suffer an imbalance, such as from the loss of pupils who would be good role models' (p.23). Mason and Burns (1994, cited in Mason and Doepner 1998, pp.169–70) report that 'although placing better students and teachers in combination [composite] classes bolsters the learning environment and subsequent achievement in these classrooms, such placements simultaneously diminish the learning environment and achievement in the adjacent, consequently less advantaged, single-grade classrooms from which these resources were taken'. The issue is commonly referred to in the literature (see, e.g., Campbell 1993, Veenman 1995).

Some parents in this study insisted that certain grades need to be monograde, particularly the first and last years of primary schooling. Other studies have reported similar beliefs; for example, the Early Childhood Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association advises against split-grade classes in kindergarten and grade 1 (Craig & McLellan 1987, p.9). The study by Roseth (1981), however, reported conflicting views on this issue.

This study confirmed the strong anecdotal belief that parents see more benefit in a composite class when their child is in the younger grade of the class. Hohl (1991, p.25), writing of parents in Quebec, reported that parents are afraid that older children in a multigrade class are 'wasting their time'. Forlin and Birch (1995, p.98) claimed that parents express concern for the future of their children when they are the more advanced students in a mixed class. This concern is ameliorated when the students are in the younger part of the class because of the perceived opportunities

for working at a higher level (with the older children). In their study of principals' views of composite classes, Mason and Doepner (1998, p.164) reported that some principals 'asserted that lower grade students benefit from exposure to upper grade curricula'. This result confirmed an earlier finding by Walsh (1989, cited in Veenman 1995, p.323) that the greatest advantage of composite classes was the 'opportunity for students at the lower level to advance academically due to exposure to the curriculum of students at the upper level'. Mason and Good (1996), however, found in their study of mathematics teaching in combination (composite) classes that little cross-grade grouping occurred.

Parents in general do not support composite classes. Chace (1961), Marzolf (1978), Perras (1983), and Wilcox (1961) (all cited in Gayfer 1991, Ch.2), as well as Gajadharsingh (whose study is summarised in Gayfer) reported parent anxiety and lack of support for multigrade class organisation, regardless of their children's experience in such classes. These authors found that parents were unwilling to support a multigrade organisation, even when they had some experience of such classes, when they agreed with the principles of multigrade grouping, and when they were pleased with their children's experience. However, negative attitudes about composite classes can, as shown in this study, be overcome to some extent by a positive experience. A positive experience is helped by selection bias, as discussed above, but may also be helped by parents' increasing their understanding of how composite classes operate. Around two-thirds of parents claimed not to understand or be happy about how their child's class operated. These uncertainties also have been reported in other studies (e.g., see Gayfer 1991, Ch.3, Hohl 1991).

The need for positive public relations about multigrade classes is discussed in Vincent (1999) and in Gayfer (1991), where Acheson (1984), Mirsky (1984), and Perras (1983) all reported changes in parent attitude when teachers explained how the class operated. In Gajadharsingh's study, teachers reported that the attitude of parents was a disadvantage, as parents did not understand how a split-grade class worked and objected to teachers trying to integrate curriculum, expecting instead that subjects should be taught strictly by grade level (Gayfer 1991, p.50). Not all authors report the need for positive public relations in an advantageous light, however – Mason and Doepner (1998, pp.164–5) cited the views held by almost half the principals in their study that 'parent concerns or inordinate public relations efforts' were a common outcome of having composite classes.

If composite class teachers adopt practices common in multiage-by-choice classes, then it is likely that parents will need to be 'educated' about current notions of 'best practice' in teaching, such as frequent and flexible grouping of students, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, choice and negotiation of curriculum, and an emphasis on

metacognition and learning how to learn. In Mason and Good's study (1996) of mathematics teaching in composite classes, little evidence was found of teachers adopting these progressive strategies. Teachers in multiage-by-choice classes or schools spend considerable effort educating parents about why they have chosen to organise the classes in this way and the sorts of teaching strategies they use. There are many cases reported in the literature and in online discussion groups of parents encouraging the extension of multiage classes in a school (e.g. Neill 1975, cited in Roseth 1981, p.9), of parents being very involved in multiage classes, and of parents requesting their child be placed in a multiage class. Parents want what is best for their children but they need to be exposed to ideas about what is 'best' beyond what they know from their own experience.

Such comments apply equally to teachers, who may have been trained at a time when notions of 'best practice' were quite different. According to Miller (1994), many teachers need to unlearn strongly held notions of how children learn in order to teach a multigrade class successfully. In their study of mathematics teaching in combination (composite) classes, Mason and Good (1996, p.254) illustrated this point: 'Combination classes, formed expediently as a result of enrolment shortages and embedded in a graded system of schooling, are often portrayed as being fundamentally different from multiage or nongraded classes (e.g., Mason & Stimson 1996) but also as naturally encouraging teachers to adopt the innovative strategies found in multiage/nongraded classes (e.g., integrated curriculum, peer tutoring, and individualized instruction)'. They further found that:

> Although some advocate combination classes as a vehicle for innovative curriculum and instruction, findings from this study suggest that combination classes created several negative tradeoffs for important processes of teaching and learning. Relative to traditional single-grade classes, most combination teachers provided less active teaching and learning, less individualized attention to students, and fewer challenging curriculum tasks.
> (Mason & Good 1996, p.256)

Their finding supports the conclusion drawn by Craig and McLellan (1987, p.8) that 'the methods teachers employ to teach in split grade classrooms may in fact be contrary to the principles of how students learn and the commitment to individualized instruction'.

Related to this issue of adoption of innovative strategies is the issue of lack of educational rationale for composite classes. Whereas multiage-by-choice teachers do justify their choice on educational grounds, and practise innovative strategies to

support their philosophical commitment, the same is not true of mixed-grade-by-necessity teachers, even though there is research evidence supporting, for example, increased motivation of students in mixed-age groups (Johnson, Johnson, Pierson & Lyons 1985). One reason for lack of an educational rationale is likely to be the transient nature of these classes, but another significant reason is likely to be the lack of training of teachers to teach these classes. In a description of the widespread nature of split-grade classes in Canada, Craig and McLellan (1987, p.6) reported that only 12% of 419 split-grade teachers in Saskatchewan indicated that they had received inservice training for multigrade classroom teaching. There is no reason to believe that this figure is unusual, as the lack of specific training to teach multigrade classes has often been mentioned in the literature (e.g. Gomolchuk & Piland 1995, Pratt & Treacy 1986, Roseth 1981, Vincent 1999).

In this study, no data were obtained about how the composite class teacher organised his or her class but observations by the author indicated that, similarly to Mason and Good's study, much of the teaching in composite classes was based on grades. Many of the problems mentioned by parents – such as timetabling problems, grade identity problems, social cohesion problems – were related to the graded structure in the school rather than to the composite class *per se*. Individual teachers were able to give their students a positive schooling experience, both academically and socially, in spite of the increased demands of a composite class taught largely along grade lines and their success was reflected in the acknowledgement of nearly three-quarters of the parents that the right decision had been made about their child's class placement. Three-quarters of these parents in turn attributed this belief to their child's progress, the teacher and their child's happiness. A similar proportion of parents who did not think the right decision had been made about their child's class placement attributed their belief to the same reasons. It is not surprising that for most parents, achievement, social issues and their assessment of the quality of the teacher determined their views about the success or otherwise of the class structure. In his best-evidence synthesis of studies of different types of mixed-age classes, Veenman (1995, pp.370–371) found no significant difference in achievement between multigrade and single-grade classes and posited that grouping alone is unlikely to have an effect. Much more relevant than the type of classroom organisation is the quality of the teaching (Lloyd 1999). The parents in this study agree.

Conclusion

Parents in this study confirmed the anecdotal evidence that composite classes are not popular, especially those that come and go in an irregular fashion. The study was novel because more composite classes were formed than were necessary from the enrolment pattern, that is, because there was no perceived necessity for some of the

classes. The reason for formation of the composite classes varied from the usual reasons but the way the teachers and children were selected for the classes, and the way the classes were taught (as quasi-monograde classes within the same room), followed a common pattern.

Most parents conceded that they changed their initial negative response when their child seemed to be progressing well academically and to be happy socially but many were still very guarded in their support for the class. Negative concerns and statements were often related to a perception that composite classes were not preferable or desirable in a situation where monograde classes also existed. Lack of knowledge and understanding about such classes, perceived lack of teacher experience in teaching such classes (because of their lack of permanence in the school), issues of grade and class identity, and issues of perceived selection bias all contributed to parents' attitudes toward composite classes during one year in this primary school.

Future research over a longer time period than one year would add useful information about parents' views of composite classes. For example, if a school persisted in having a significant number of composite classes (more than required by necessity), would parents' attitudes change as both the 'novelty' of the class and each teacher's experience became more commonplace? How resistant to change would their views then and what factors would become relevant (such as keeping the same teacher and/or the same classmates)? What role would 'parent education' play? Would teachers continue to support such an arrangement and thereby influence parents' views? The questions are intriguing; the answers are likely to remain elusive as the likelihood of a suitable follow-up study carried out over a longer period but under very similar conditions is low. 'Change' rather than 'stability' seems to have become a more accurate descriptor of contemporary education. This study was a 'snapshot' of one year in one school. As such, the findings are not generalisable though it is tempting to think that the issues of perceived choice, social cohesion (grade/class identity) and selection bias might be generalisable.

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